

Chapter 9.A Dialog on Positionality, Mentoring, and Impermanence

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The following is a conversation between Ritika Popli (female, Pre-tenure, international faculty, recent immigrant) and Meg Worley (female, tenured, department chair, US citizen).

mw: Mentorship is rooted in positionality and imbalance: Mentors are seen as older and wiser, mentees as younger and greener. The goal is to lessen that imbalance of knowledge, but too often the assumption is that the mentor will always be wiser than the mentee. Just the suffixes -or (actor) and -ee (acted upon) inscribe the centrality of position on the relationship.

The word “mentor” comes from the *Odyssey*, where Mentor is an older man charged by Odysseus to take care of the household while he is away at the Trojan War. The goddess Athena, however, disguises herself as Mentor to advise Odysseus’ son on his travels to find his father, and negotiates peace in the last line of the epic. The human Mentor is almost a neoliberal functionary, protecting the system, while the goddess-Mentor is concerned for a son in need.

Rp: Meg’s etymological explanation is important. Mentoring relationships are not meant to be permanent. Of course, they could be—but by nature are not meant to be. The insistence on mentoring as a permanent relationship is problematic as it does not consider the evolving nature of positionality. Moreover, if the experience is not a positive one, it can end with despondency, anxiety, guilt, and even hostility.

Our conversations over the last two years reflect awareness of our positions—in terms of race, academic rank, nationality, (im)migrant, disciplinary training. Growing up in Delhi, India, I observed rigid gender, caste, class, and other social hierarchies where transgressions were rare and came at a huge cost. Even the advice my mother gave me when I was at the airport boarding the flight to Chicago was “stay invisible. The more you get noticed you can cause trouble for yourself.” She was only passing down advice she had inherited while leading a patriarchal life—probably not the best advice for American academia. Invisibility is structurally antithetical to academia. In the US, we are advised to contribute in discussions, publish more, go to conferences and be visible, but that advice is not always easy to follow.

As department chair Meg is expected to pass down information which is required to function effectively (and often survive). She does not sieve information and simply pass it on, instead she often elaborates and contextualizes it in the history of the institution. It can be particularly challenging to navigate a space such as Colgate (a small liberal arts college in rural New York). Overwhelming whiteness makes its presence felt in the everyday, and many expectations are only implied. However, I do not feel shut down by the institutional definition of our relationship. In fact, Meg has gently nudged me to develop more confidence in my abilities and judgment.

mw: Ritika is right about the official structure of mentorship in our relationship as chair and pre-tenure faculty. At the same time, it really chafes, and I find myself working against it. Most of the time, it doesn't feel like "mentorship"; rather, I know some stuff, and I'm sharing it with the great colleague in the office next to mine. But Ritika may not see it that way. I suspect that our mentoring relationship is disproportionately conditioned by my own informal attitude and style of collegiality. The crux of the mentoring relationship at all times is the extent to which the mentee is free to (and feels free to) reject the advice of the mentor, and I can't lose sight of that, informality notwithstanding. Ideally, every mentor fits their style to the needs of the mentee, and if my casual style had been an issue for Ritika, I would have adjusted my level of formality.

Rp: It can be difficult to arrive at the informality in a relationship. Perhaps this is where Meg and I diverge. It is true that Meg's personality has allowed for our dynamic to be that of friend-colleagues from the start. However, in previous formal mentoring relations there was a cost to not heeding the advice. The cost could sometimes even be severe. One way in which I have overcome the tendency to mimic hierarchy is to think of the impermanence of mentoring. Investing and building long-lasting relationships is key, but relationships evolve. The terms do not have to be permanently defined and fixed.

Whether enduring or not, ultimately, for any mentoring relationship to be an enriching experience, mentors and mentees should share the same set of responsibilities: Honesty, mutual respect, clarity of expectations, transparency, generosity, empathy. These responsibilities, when taken seriously, can even foretell the end of the mentoring relationship—regardless of shifting power dynamics—and set the conditions under which the relationship may be transformed into something new.